

50,000 Subjected To Legal Wiretaps

By Margaret Gentry
Associated Press

Federal and state investigators used listening devices and telephone taps to eavesdrop on nearly 50,000 people last year, but what they heard, more often than not, was innocent conversation.

Those conclusions emerged from the government's annual statistical report on court-approved wiretaps and bugs. The report, issued Friday, was prepared by the Administrative Office of U.S. Courts.

Federal and state investigators obtained court warrants for 701 taps and bugs in 1975, actually installing them in 676 cases, the report said. The figures mark a 4 per cent decrease from the previous year.

The report said each case of eavesdropping intercepted an average of 654 conversations involving 71 persons. An average of 305 conversations, or about 46 per cent, were considered incriminating, the report said.

According to the government statistics, investigators overheard nearly a half-million conversations, but concluded that more than 235,000 of them had nothing to do with criminal activity.

The report showed that five cases of electronic surveillance produced no incriminating evidence at all, although 652 conversations involving 68 persons were overheard.

Two of those cases were under state warrants in New York, and one each under state warrants in New Mexico, Florida and Massachusetts.

The report said federal taps and bugs produced a somewhat higher proportion of incriminating evidence. It said 67 per cent of the conversations heard by federal agents were considered incriminating.

The 1968 federal law authorizing taps and bugs in certain criminal cases requires investigators to "minimize" the interception of innocent conversations.

But law investigators complained they often can't determine that a conversation is going to be innocent until after listening to all of it.

The report showed that federal and state officials shy away from using bugs, the tiny microphones planted in rooms or cars to transmit conversations to tape recorders elsewhere.

Federal authorities used only 11 bugs and 12 combinations of bugs and telephone taps. States used 26 bugs and seven combinations.

The National Wiretap Commission, in a separate report Friday, urged wider use of bugs and phone taps and said judges should specifically authorize investigators to break into private premises to plant bugs.